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THE USE OF BUFFALO HAIR

BY THE

NORTH AMERICAN INDIANS.

BY

D. I. BUSHNELL, JUNR.

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America, North : Ethnography. With Plate M. Bushnell.

The Use of Buffalo Hair by the North American Indians. By 111
D. I. Bushnell, Junr.

Various writers during the eighteenth century refer to the art of spinning or twisting the hair of the American buffalo (*Bison americanus*) as then practised by the North American Indians, and their subsequent use of the cord in weaving belts, garters, blankets, or other useful and necessary articles. But such material, although at one time so plentiful, has now become excessively rare, and a bag preserved in the Pitt-Rivers Museum at Oxford is probably one of the finest examples existing at the present time.

It is evident that the hair or wool of the buffalo was utilised by the Indians over the greater part of America, from near the Atlantic coast in the south-eastern part of the country, throughout the valley of the Mississippi, and westward to the Rocky Mountains.

The settlers in the western parts of Carolina during the latter part of the seventeenth century sometimes killed buffalo on the eastern side of the mountains ; but, according to Lawson, "He [the buffalo] seldom appears amongst the English "Inhabitants his chief Haunt being in the Land of Messiasippi, which is for the "most part a plain Country ; yet I have known some kill'd on the Hilly Part of "Cape-Fair-River, they passing the Ledges of the vast Mountains from the said "Messiasippi, before they can come near us . . . Of the wild Bull's skin Buff "is made. The Indians cut the skins into Quarters for the ease of their transporta- "tion, and make Beds to lie on. The[y] spin the Hair into Garters, Girdles, Sashes "and the like, it being long and curled and often of a chesnut or red Colour."*

As Lawson here refers to the "Land of Messiasippi" it is interesting to learn that the hair or wool of the buffalo was at that time used by the Illinois Indians. Charlevoix wrote from "Kaskasquias, Oct. 20, 1721 . . . Their women are very "neat handed and industrious. They spin the wool of the buffalo, which they make "as fine as that of English sheep . . . Of this they manufacture stuffs which "are dyed black, yellow, or a deep red."

This reference to dyed hair recalls an entry in the old Sloane Catalogue in the British Museum which reads : "1216. The same [buffalo] hair dyed red and yellow "tyed in tufts on a string as an ornament for the Carolina Indians." Unfortunately the specimen no longer exists.

The bag in the Pitt-Rivers Museum is 50 cm. in length and 22 cm. in depth, not including the open band around the top, which is about 2 cm. in width. The fringe along the lower part varies from 10 to 20 cm. in length.

The bag was made in rather an unusual manner. Evidently two strips were first braided ; these are each 2.5 cm. in width and in length equal the depth of the bag. The strips served as the ends of the bag, the sides being braided between and attached to them. This should be considered rather as an example of braiding than weaving, as the cords extend diagonally across the surface and consequently it is not possible to distinguish between warp and woof elements. The fringe is formed by plaiting several cords extending from the lower part of the two sides.

The narrow strips at the ends are rather dark and may have been dyed ; the sides, however, are formed of the natural brown hair.

The small beads used in decorating the bag are the ordinary opaque white bead of European make, carried by the traders during the early days. The beads were

* John Lawson, *History of Carolina* (London, 1714), p. 115.

† Charlevoix, *Journal of a Voyage to North America* (London, 1761), Vol. II., p. 222.

not attached to the surface, but were strung on the cords before the bag was made. This, according to Adair, was the custom of the Indians in the south-eastern part of the country, for he wrote that, "In the winter season the women gather buffalo's hair, a sort of coarse brown enrl ed wool; and having spun it as fine as they can, and properly doubled it, they put small beads of different colours upon the yarn as they work it; the figures they work in those small webs are generally uniform, but sometimes they diversify them on both sides."*

In Fig. 1 is shown a small section of the bag enlarged to twice the size of the original, while in Fig. 2 is reproduced a drawing of a fragment of charred cloth from a mound in Ohio. This was figured by Professor Holmes as c, Pl. VII., in his paper on "Prehistoric Textile Art."† The form of braiding as represented by this small piece of ancient cloth is exactly the same as that of the Pitt-Rivers bag.

In form and size, though not in weaving, this bag resembles several collected by the writer among the Ojibways, near Mille Lac, in the state of Minnesota. The Ojibway specimens, however, are made of European wool; but they have a similar open band around the top, which, like the Pitt-Rivers bag, could be closed by means of a draw-string passing through the loops. From members of the same tribe, although

FIG. 1.—PORTION OF THE BAG.

much farther north, the writer obtained a somewhat similar bag made of narrow strips of cedar bark. The pieces of bark were braided diagonally, similar to the cords of the buffalo bag, and there was also an open band at the top; but no running cord as in the case of the others. In this respect it resembles the small Iroquois bag belonging to the Sloane collection in the British Museum.

Unfortunately nothing is known concerning the history of the Pitt-Rivers specimen; there are no records of when or where it was obtained. But it was probably made in some part of the Ohio valley.

As has already been mentioned, the hair or wool of the buffalo was formerly used by the Indians throughout the greater part of America.

Hunter, who had lived for many years among the Osage Indians, wrote, "The hair of the buffalo and other animals is sometimes manufactured into blankets; the hair is first twisted by hand and wound into balls."‡ By the different tribes in the Upper Missouri valley, beyond the Mississippi, the hair was used for an entirely different purpose, for "The Assiniboinis, Rapid Indians, Blackfeet, and Mandans, together with all the other Indians who inhabit a plain country always perform their journeys on horseback. . . . They do not often use bridles but guide their horses with halters made of ropes which are manufactured from the hair of the buffaloe, which are very strong and durable."§

* Adair, *History of the North American Indians* (London, 1775), p. 432.

† *Thirteenth Annual Report, Bureau of Ethnology* (Washington, 1896).

‡ J. D. Hunter, *Memoirs of a Captivity* (London, 1824), p. 289.

§ D. W. Harmon, *Journal* (Andover, 1820), p. 336.

In a small geography published during the year 1693* there is an interesting note, probably taken from a Spanish writer, to the effect that "The Riches of Quiviria" consist in their Oxen, whose Flesh is the ordinary Food of the Inhabitants, their "Skins serve them for cloathing, their Hair for Thread, of their Nerves and Sinews " they make Cords and Bow-strings; of their bones " they make Nails and Bodkins; of their Horns " Trumpets; of their Bladders vessels to keep " water in and their Dung when dried serves " for fire."

FIG. 2.—FRAGMENT OF CHARRED CLOTH, FROM A MOUND IN OHIO. (Holmes, *Pre-historic Textile Art*, Pl. VII, 13th Rep. Bur. Ethnol.)

From these references we learn of the various uses to which the hair or wool was put by the widely separated tribes in America: but comparatively few objects made of it exist at the present day.

The bag in the Pitt-Rivers Museum at Oxford is certainly a very rare and interesting specimen, and I am indebted to Mr. Balfour for the privilege of photographing and examining it.

A similar bag is preserved in the British Museum (Fig. 3): it is, however, much smaller than the Pitt-Rivers specimen, being only 28 cm. in length and 20 cm. in depth. The fringe averages about 18 cm. in length. This specimen is also made of buffalo hair. Originally the sides were dyed red, but very little colour now remains. Narrow braided bands 3.5 cm. in width, dyed black, serve as the ends; to these the side pieces have been attached. In this respect it is similar to the Pitt-Rivers bag, but, as may be seen in the photograph (Fig. 3), it has no open band around the top, nor has it a running cord by means of which it could have been closed. Two bands similarly braided and dyed red, each having a length of 40 cm. and a width of 6 cm., have been attached to either end of the bag, these were probably joined together and so served as a band over the shoulder.

In addition to the bag the British Museum possesses other examples of this class of work in the form of belts and smaller bands, intended to be worn around the legs or arms. The most important piece is an unusually large belt, measuring—not including the fringe—205 cm. in length and having a width of 9 cm. It is made of buffalo hair, braided as are the bags. With the exception of a narrow black line on either edge, it is formed of the natural brown hair. Evidently the black border was braided after the main portion of the belt had been completed.

All the belts and bands in the British Museum collection are decorated by means of small white beads, which were

FIG. 3.—BUFFALO HAIR BAG IN THE BRITISH MUSEUM.

* Robt. Morden, *Geography Rectified, &c.*, 3rd ed. (London, 1693). p. 586.

strung on the cord before the articles were braided. Unfortunately it is not known when or where these pieces were collected, but all are evidently very old.

It would certainly be very interesting to know if other specimens of this work are preserved in the various collections in Europe, especially if it can be stated definitely where and when they were obtained.

D. I. BUSHNELL, JUNR.

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BUFFALO HAIR BAG.
PITT RIVERS MUSEUM, OXFORD.

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